

Copper River and Bristol Bay: Comparison of Salmon and Mineral Resources

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How similar are Alaska's two most famous sockeye salmon runs, the Copper River and Bristol Bay? And how similar are Alaska's two most famous copper deposits, Kennecott and Pebble? Does mining pose a similar risk to salmon in both watersheds? This note compares salmon and copper resources in both watersheds and examines potential for harm to salmon from mining at Kennecott and Pebble.

THE SALMON RESOURCE

During 2001 to 2010, the Copper River sockeye salmon run averaged 2.1 million fish¹, less than 7% of Bristol Bay's average run of 33.3 million fish² — the world's largest sockeye salmon run (Table 1). The Copper River run is annually supplemented with 20.9 million hatchery fry³ of which 1.5% survives to maturity; in contrast, Bristol Bay sockeye salmon are all wild (Table 1).

Table 1. Average salmon production during 2001- 2010 in the Copper River and Bristol Bay watersheds⁴.

Statistic	Watershed	
	Copper River	Bristol Bay
Average Annual Sockeye Run (millions)	2.1	33.3
Average Commercial Sockeye Harvest (millions)	1.2	22.4
Average Annual Hatchery Release (fry) (millions)	20.9	0
Average Hatchery Contribution to Run (thousands)	236	0
Average Subsistence Harvest (all users) (thousands)	168	109
Average Sport Harvest (thousands)	13	14
Average Non-Sockeye Commercial Harvest:		
Chinook	32,032	48,603
Coho	300,131	73,073
Chum	9356	1,199,477
Pink	20,572	122,565

THE COPPER RESOURCE

The question of whether mining will harm fish is not related to the kind of ore mined, but rather to the rock in which the ore is found, and the type of mining used to recover the ore. While copper deposits occur in the headwaters of both the Copper River and Bristol Bay, the deposits are extremely different.

The Copper River deposit, Kennecott, is a contact metamorphic skarn-type deposit, which means it contains very high-grade copper sulfides associated with carbonate minerals⁵. While sulfides generate acid, carbonates consume them, so there is less risk of acid mine drainage causing increased dissolved copper in water, which can harm fish⁶.

¹ <http://www.adfg.alaska.gov/FedAidPDFs/FMR10-55.pdf>

² <http://www.sf.adfg.state.ak.us/FedAidpdfs/FMR11-23.pdf>

³ <http://www.sf.adfg.state.ak.us/FedAidpdfs/FMR11-23.pdf>

⁴ Salomone et al. 2011. 2010 Bristol Bay Area Annual Management Report. Fishery Management Report 11-23. Alaska Department of Fish and Game available at: <http://www.adfg.alaska.gov/FedAidPDFs/FMR10-55.pdf> AND Botz et al. 2010. 2009 Prince William Sound Area Finfish Management Report. Fishery Management Report No. 10-55. Alaska Department of Fish and Game available at: <http://www.sf.adfg.state.ak.us/FedAidpdfs/FMR11-23.pdf>

⁵ Winkler, G. R. 2000. A Geologic Guide to Wrangell–Saint Elias National Park and Preserve, Alaska, A Tectonic Collage of Northbound Terranes. USGS Professional paper 1616. Available from <http://www.alaskageographic.org/>

⁶ Tierney, KB et al. 2010. Aquatic Toxicology 96 (2010) 2–26. AND Hansen et al. 1999. Environmental Toxicology and Chemistry 18, 1972–1978.

Kennecott is located high on a mountain and was mined (1911-1938) by selective stope mining; ore was carried to a mill via an aerial tramway⁷. The high copper concentration, which averaged almost 13% copper over the life of the mine⁸, also meant Kennecott's development produced minimal waste. Water for the mine was taken from a non-salmon bearing stream.

In contrast, the proposed Pebble mine is a porphyry deposit, with only scattered specks and tiny veins of copper throughout the ore. This low-grade deposit contains approximately 0.34% copper, 0.023% molybdenum, and 0.01 ounces gold per ton⁹. Extracting one pound of copper requires pulverizing and chemically processing 294 pounds of ore; extracting one pound of molybdenum requires processing approximately two tons of ore, and extracting one ounce of gold requires processing 100 tons of ore. Processing ore at Pebble will require large amounts of water; 2006 permit applications for water currently total about 34 billion gallons per year¹⁰. Unlike Kennecott, Pebble has elevated concentrations of sulfides (1-9%) and virtually no carbonate minerals to neutralize acid production, therefore it has greater potential to produce acid mine drainage which can mobilize metals harmful to fish, such as copper¹¹, into nearby streams.

Porphyry deposits are typically mined using bulk-mining methods – surface open pit mining and underground block caving. Open pit mining typically generates large volumes of waste rock in addition to ore. Milling (processing) the ore from both surface and underground mining requires large quantities of water, and the tailings (waste) which remain from processing will require perpetual on-site storage behind large tailings dams and in waste rock piles (approximately 99% of the processed ore becomes tailings-waste). One Pebble proposal includes plans for several earthen tailings dams, the largest over 700 feet high¹², which must be constructed to last into perpetuity to prevent releases of metals and processing chemicals that can be toxic to fish and aquatic life¹³.

Table 2. Comparing the Kennecott Copper Mine deposit and proposed Pebble Mine deposits in terms of copper resources and mining methods.

	Kennecott Mine (Copper River Drainage)	Pebble Mine (Bristol Bay Drainage)
Copper Deposit	Skarn Deposit	Porphyry Deposit
Mining method	Underground stope mining	Open pit and/or block caving
Mineral resource	≈ 5 Million tons ¹⁴	10.8 Billion tons ¹⁵
Ratio of resource extracted to waste materials produced	High	Low
Acid generation potential	Acid-neutralizing carbonates present in large quantity	Few acid-neutralizing minerals present

To put the size and potential impact of the two mines in perspective, **it would take over 2,000 Kennecott-sized mines to produce the same amount of ore that is projected for the Pebble mine.** Ore at the Kennecott mine averaged about 13% copper, while ore at Pebble averages about 0.34% copper. However, it is the mining waste, both tailings and waste rock, that bring long term environmental risk, so a size comparison based on tons of ore mined, rather than pounds of copper produced, is appropriate.

⁷ <http://www.nps.gov/wrst/historyculture/kennecott.htm>

⁸ Winkler, G. R. 2000. A Geologic Guide to Wrangell–Saint Elias National Park and Preserve, Alaska, A Tectonic Collage of Northbound Terranes. USGS Professional paper 1616. Available from <http://www.alaskageographic.org/>

⁹ Calculated from resource information given in “Technical Report on the 2009 Program and Update on Mineral Resources and Metallurgy Pebble Copper-Gold-Molybdenum Project Iliamna Lake Area Southwestern Alaska, U.S.A.,” J. David Gaunt, et al., for Northern Dynasty Minerals Ltd, March 17, 2010.

¹⁰ <http://dnr.alaska.gov/mlw/mining/largemine/pebble/waterapp.htm>

¹¹ Ecotoxicology and Environmental Safety 42:253-264 AND Environmental Science and Technology 14(8): 2998-3004 AND Aquatic Toxicology 96(1): 2-26 AND Eisler, R. 2000. Handbook of chemical risk assessment. Vol. 1, metals. Lewis Publishers, NY, NY.

¹² <http://dnr.alaska.gov/mlw/mining/largemine/pebble/waterapp.htm>

¹³ Eisler, R. 2000. Handbook of chemical risk assessment. Vol. 1, metals. Lewis Publishers, NY.

¹⁴ Calculated from data in Winkler, G. R. 2000. A Geologic Guide to Wrangell–Saint Elias National Park and Preserve, Alaska, A Tectonic Collage of Northbound Terranes. USGS Professional paper 1616. Available from [alaskageographic.org/](http://www.alaskageographic.org/)

¹⁵ Pebble Limited Partnership News Release, 1Feb10, <http://www.pebblepartnership.com/pages/reading-room/press-releases.php>

COPPER MINING AND SALMON

Salmon use headwaters of the Copper, Nushagak, and Kvichak Rivers during the freshwater phase of their life history. The Kennecott mine is high in the mountains above a glacier, away from salmon habitat (Figure 1) and water for ore processing was taken from a non-fish bearing stream. Contemporary Alaska Department of Fish and Game records show coho salmon use the Kennecott River¹⁶, however, no other species are documented as spawning or rearing downstream of Kennecott in the Nizina or Chuitina rivers although those waters are salmon migration corridors¹⁷ (Figure 1).

In contrast, Pebble ore lies directly under salmon streams¹⁸ (Figure 1) that drain to the Nushagak River and Iliamna Lake of the Kvichak River. From 1956 to 2010, these two river systems produced over 678 million sockeye salmon about 40% of total Bristol Bay sockeye production¹⁹. Upper Talarik Creek, originating in Pebble claims, flows about 20 miles from the Pebble ore body into Iliamna Lake, the world's largest sockeye salmon rearing lake, where millions to billions of sockeye fry from over 48 different spawning populations rear. Pebble has high potential to develop acid mine drainage which can increase dissolved copper, zinc²⁰, and other metals harmful to fish into ground and surface waters that feed essential salmon spawning, incubation, rearing and migration habitats.

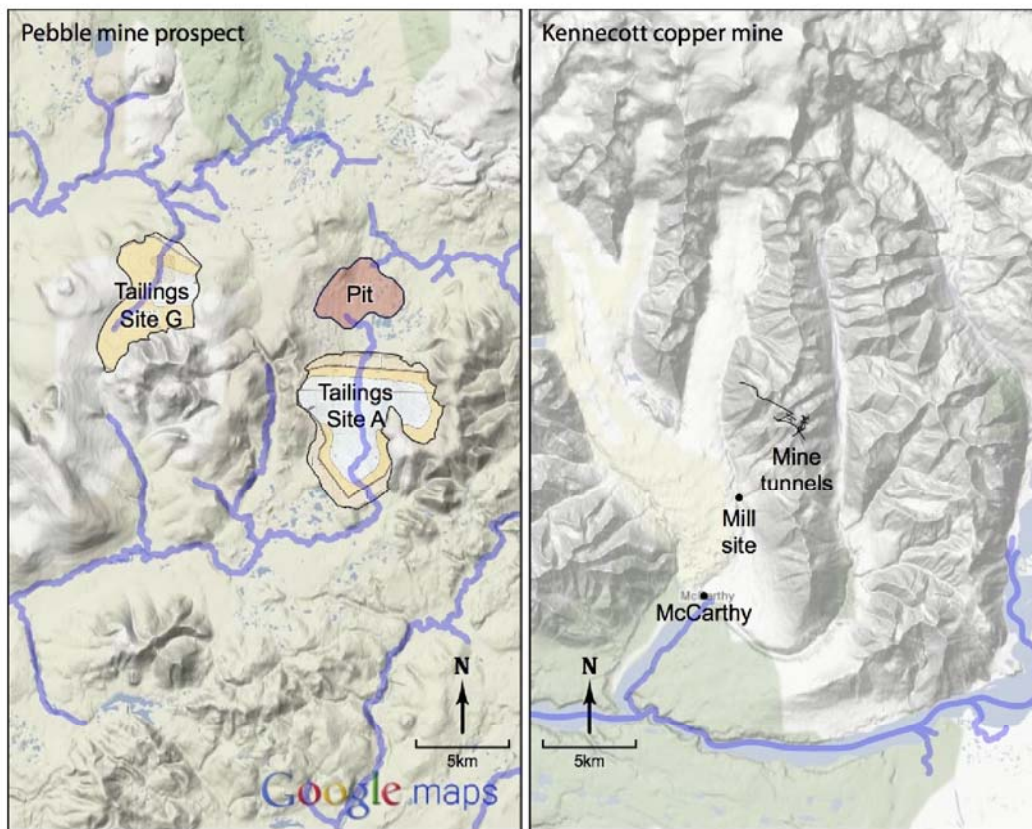


Figure 1. Left panel shows location of Pebble ore deposit (red) and proposed tailings facilities²¹ in contrast to the Kennecott ore deposit (tunnels in right panel), which had minimal waste. Anadromous salmon streams in blue for both sites²². Since 2006, the Pebble ore deposit has increased from 7.5 to 10.8 billion tons therefore estimated tailings facilities would be larger than depicted here.

¹⁶ Alaska Department of Fish and Game fish distribution database: http://gis.sf.adfg.state.ak.us/AWC_IMS/viewer.htm

¹⁷ Alaska Department of Fish and Game fish distribution database at: http://gis.sf.adfg.state.ak.us/AWC_IMS/viewer.htm

¹⁸ ADFG anadromous waters catalogue for Iliamna region available at <http://www.adfg.alaska.gov/sf/SARR/AWC/index.cfm?ADFG=maps.display&LocationID=ILI250.PDF®ion=swt>

¹⁹ ADFG Commercial Salmon fisheries data. Available from ADFG, Anchorage, AK.

²⁰ Eisler, R. 2000. Handbook of chemical risk assessment. Vol. 1, metals. Lewis Publishers, NY.

²¹ <http://dnr.alaska.gov/mlw/mining/largemine/pebble/waterapp.htm>

²² Alaska Department of Fish and Game fish distribution database: http://gis.sf.adfg.state.ak.us/AWC_IMS/viewer.htm

SUMMARY

1. Copper River produces an average of 2.1 million sockeye per year; in contrast, Bristol Bay produces an average of 33.3 million sockeye salmon per year.
2. The Copper River Kennecott Mine was the world's richest copper deposit averaging about 13% copper; it was not acid generating, it produced minimal waste which did not require perpetual storage or water treatment. In contrast, Pebble is a very low-grade deposit averaging about 0.34% copper, it has high potential to produce acid mine drainage (1-9% sulfides), and over 99% of what is mined will be waste that will require perpetual storage, monitoring and perhaps treatment.
3. It would take over 2,000 Kennecott-sized mines to produce the same amount of ore that is projected for the Pebble mine.
4. The Kennecott Mine did not destroy productive salmon habitat; in contrast Pebble will destroy salmon habitat, and will pose a contamination risk to two rivers that account for over 40% of the total Bristol Bay sockeye run since 1956.

CONCLUSION

Compared to the Kennecott Mine, development of the Pebble Prospect poses a greater risk to salmon production.



Image of Kennecott Mine power plant with the Root Glacier in the background, Kennecott Mines National Historic Landmark, Wrangell -St. Elias National Park and Preserve, McCarthy, Alaska. Photo and history of the mine available from www.nps.gov/wrst/images/20060705142735.JPG. Kennecott is considered the best example of early 20th Century copper mining.